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# The Sydney Opera House: Design, History and Theatrical Haunting.

Andrew Filmer

The Maestro:     *The building works*  
                          *And the public love it.*  
Alexandra:        *But it's not what it could have been.*<sup>1</sup>

Theatre, Marvin Carlson tells us, is “a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.”<sup>2</sup> Theatre buildings, the traditional sites of theatrical activity, are in a similar sense, also ‘haunted’ or ‘ghosted’. In *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre As Memory Machine*, Carlson conducts his investigation of theatrical repetition and haunting from the perspective of theatre audiences. Indeed, he specifically states that his interest is in haunting “as it impacts upon reception.”<sup>3</sup> However, it is also useful to investigate the impact of haunting upon those persons engaged in creating theatre, theatre practitioners. For both performers and technicians, theatre buildings are primarily places of work. How then do theatre practitioners experience theatrical haunting? In what ways are their workplaces haunted, and how are they affected by this haunting?

In this paper I will use Carlson’s notion of ‘haunting’ or ‘ghosting’ to examine aspects of theatre practitioners’ experience working within the most instantly recognizable of theatrical venues, the Sydney Opera House. In light of the Opera House’s famously difficult sixteen year design and construction period, I will investigate how previous government funding and design priorities continue to haunt the practitioners who work within its famous exterior. In doing so I must admit at the outset the complex nature of both the building itself and the phenomenon under examination. This investigation will only deal with the history of political decision making that haunts the Opera House. The research material presented here has been gathered from extensive interviews with theatre practitioners as well as the observation of practitioners working within the Opera House.



*Figure 1: The Sydney Opera House.*

Carlson uses the overlapping terms ‘haunting’ and ‘ghosting’ to explain the operations of memory, repetition and re-enactment that form a basis for theatrical activity. His unambiguous view is that “everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilised, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted.”<sup>4</sup> While this is particularly true of theatrical performance, Carlson also recognises that places of performance, theatre buildings, are never

phenomenologically empty, but are “made out of something else.”<sup>5</sup> It is this ‘something else’, be it the theatrical history of a building or a previous non-theatrical use of its structure or its site, that “has the potential, often realized, of “bleeding through””<sup>6</sup> into the present.

Carlson’s recognition of such operations of memory within theatre buildings is enriched when underpinned by the understanding of place expressed in the work of Edward Casey. Casey investigates the human experience of place from an understanding of it as “the bedrock of our being-in-the-world.”<sup>7</sup> He notes that human beings are “ineluctably place-bound,”<sup>8</sup> and that “bodies and places are connatural terms.”<sup>9</sup> For human beings, this close relation between body and place means that particular places will “gather experiences and histories,”<sup>10</sup> even “such unbodylike entities as thoughts and memories.”<sup>11</sup>

Utilizing Casey’s observation that “a building condenses a culture in one place,”<sup>12</sup> Gay McAuley has identified that theatre buildings, in the very fabric of their physical existence, are “a very potent means of transmitting practical knowledge and performance traditions.”<sup>13</sup> This is because they “incorporate within themselves indications of the practices which they are designed to house.”<sup>14</sup> Practitioners can experience such knowledge as an unhelpfully haunting presence when, as McAuley points out, “there is too great a distance between the practice of theatre as predicated by the building and the practices deemed appropriate to the present by the artists.”<sup>15</sup>

The Sydney Opera House is a theatre building in which practitioner experience is noticeably shaped by the ‘bleeding through’ or ‘haunting’ of its past into the present. This is reinforced not only by the building’s international status, but also by the profound importance of the Opera House in Australia’s cultural history. In Australia, government subsidy for the performing arts did not begin until the 1950’s. The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, established in 1954, was Australia’s first public funding body for the performing arts.<sup>16</sup> Aiming to counter a national perception that Australian culture was inferior to that of Britain, the Trust quickly established arts

training institutions, provided funding for Australian theatrical productions and founded national ballet and opera companies. In a broad sense, the proposal of an ‘opera house’ for Sydney was a result of this “naïve reaching out for culture”<sup>17</sup> and the new development of government support for the performing arts. The eventual construction of the Sydney Opera House was important not simply because it provided a new venue for the performing arts, but because it became a clear “symbolic statement of the importance of the arts to the community.”<sup>18</sup>

Within the context of an increasing national cultural awareness, the decision to build an ‘opera house’ for Sydney arose specifically out of a situation of increasing success experienced by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. At that time, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the expatriate British conductor Sir Eugene Goossens, possessed an annual public subscription which had markedly outgrown their usual venue, the Sydney Town Hall. Goossens, therefore, began to publicly state the need for a purpose-built concert venue in Sydney.<sup>19</sup>

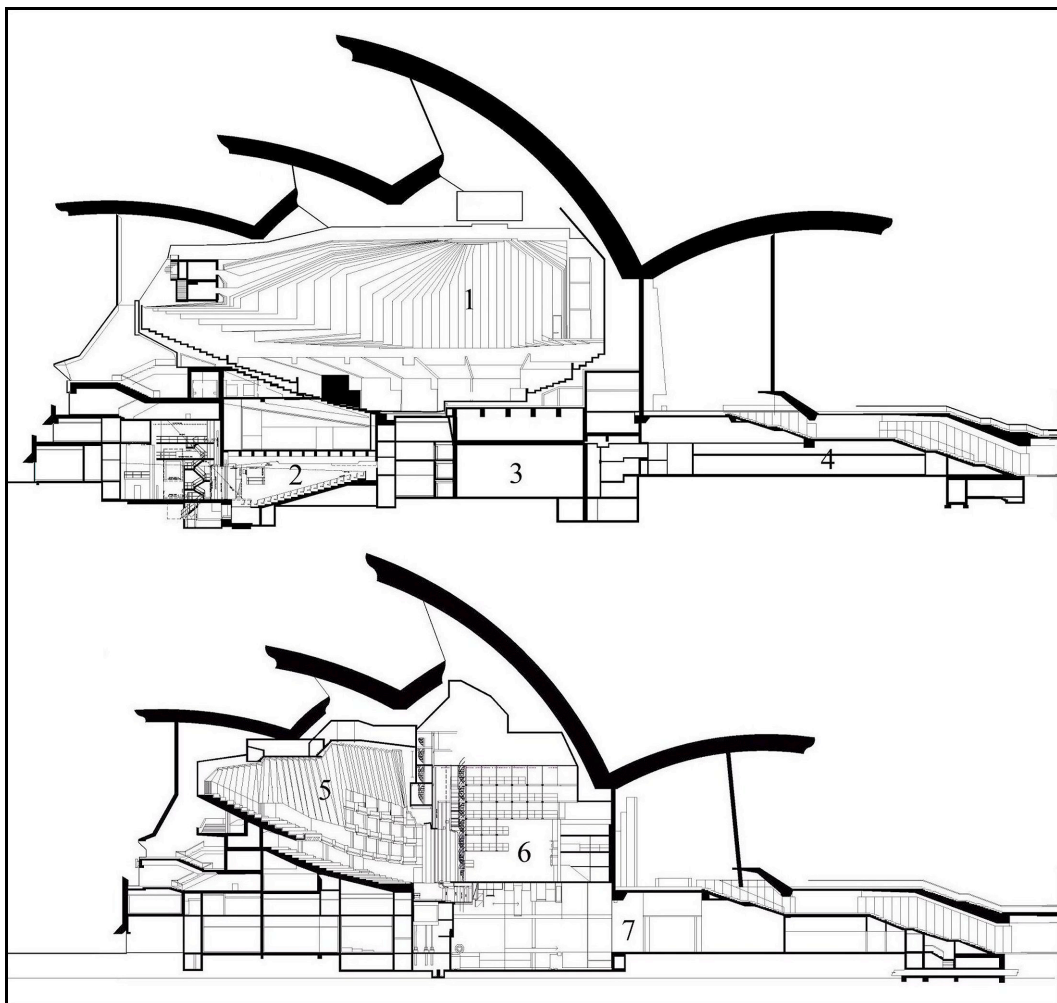
The proposal for an ‘opera house’ gained political support following a New South Wales state government election in 1952. The newly elected Labor Premier, John Joseph Cahill, voiced his support for the idea and established a committee to oversee its planning. Following their deliberations, an international architectural competition was held during 1956, which called for designs for a ‘National Opera House’. In January 1957, the unique design submitted by a young Danish architect, Jorn Utzon, was announced the winner. Whilst containing a Major and a Minor Hall as required in the competition brief,<sup>20</sup> Utzon’s submission proved a singularly perceptive design response to the building’s proposed position on Sydney’s Bennelong Point. The groundbreaking nature of Utzon’s design, which featured a heavy base podium topped with seemingly weightless white shells, saw its construction divided into three separate stages. Stage I involved the construction of the podium, Stage II the shells, and Stage III the interiors.

The political support that was a necessity in actually constructing the Sydney Opera House was also a problematic influence from the beginning. At Premier Cahill's insistence construction commenced in March 1959, shortly before another state election. This politically expedient decision resulted in the podium of the building being constructed before Utzon had finalised his designs for the roof structure. Construction, therefore, ran ahead of design decisions, proving "a disastrous handicap to the building program."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, when the roof structure proved significantly heavier than first thought, the podium had to have sections blasted out of it and extra reinforcing added. Architectural historian Philip Drew has claimed that "many of the Opera House's later problems can be traced to Cahill's precipitous decision to begin construction before the building was fully planned."<sup>22</sup>

The confusion of design and construction timetables resulted in rapidly escalating expenditure during the 1960's along with a growing public perception that money was being unnecessarily wasted. Added to this was the indecision of the various advisory committees whose changes of opinion resulted in re-designs of various areas. The delay and perception of money-wasting led to both tighter controls being placed on Utzon's investigative design process and political problems for the Labor government. These political problems came to a head in the 1965 state election which saw the Liberal/Country Party coalition win power with a stated policy of putting "some business common sense into what is happening on Bennelong Point."<sup>23</sup>

With increasingly tight control being exercised by his new political masters, Utzon soon found his position untenable. In February 1966 he offered his resignation. The government accepted, and Utzon left the Opera House project and Australia. Within two months of Utzon's departure the government appointed a panel of Australian architects to complete the unfinished interior sections of Stage III.

Under considerable political pressure and public scrutiny, the new panel of architects instituted what was known as the ‘Review of Programme’. This resulted in a complete rearrangement in the function of the internal venues. The Major Hall, conceived by Utzon as a dual purpose hall for both concerts and opera, was now designated as a single purpose concert venue. The Minor Hall, conceived by Utzon as a venue for drama and chamber opera, now became the main venue for opera and ballet. This rearrangement of venues meant that the areas beneath the Major Hall, originally intended for the changing and storage of opera sets, were now left stripped of their function. Into these areas, the panel inserted a drama theatre, a recording hall for the orchestra and a cinema. Architect Yuzo Mikami, a former employee of Utzon, has written that he felt evidence of “strong political pressure” in the way the panel “did everything they could to increase the total number of seats available in the building.”<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 2: Cross-sections of the Sydney Opera House demonstrating the arrangement of venues following the ‘Review of Function’. Above – The Concert Hall. Below – The Opera Theatre.<sup>25</sup>**  
 1. – Concert Hall. 2. – Drama Theatre 3. – Recording Hall (now the Studio) 4. – Cinema (now the Playhouse)

What this necessarily brief history demonstrates is the degree to which political intervention has shaped the Sydney Opera House and compromised the construction and subsequent functioning of its interior. I will now investigate practitioner experience within the Sydney Opera House and examine the ways in which practitioners perceive the building to be haunted by its past.

The most common observation made by all practitioners working within the Sydney Opera House is the perception of a qualitative difference between the exterior of the building and its interior. This distinction between exterior and interior relates to the articulation of space evident in the building's internal layout, the decorative elements used in these spaces and the atmosphere that is discerned.<sup>26</sup> The language used by practitioners to describe the difference between the exterior and the interior of the building is illuminating. The exterior is “unmistakeable”, it “looks great”, is “awesome”, and “exciting”, whilst the interior is described as “damn functional”, “deadening” and “not conducive to creativity”.

Similarly, practitioners also report a common perception that the interior of the Sydney Opera House lacks an appropriately theatrical atmosphere. Essentially, they report that the Opera House doesn't feel like a theatre should. Interestingly, this perception is reported by practitioners with diametrically opposed opinions about the building. Both those who state that they love the building and others, who state that they hate it, link these opinions to the building's “industrial” feel. Those who view the interior favourably perceive it as lacking pretensions, and feeling “like a workspace.”<sup>27</sup> Those who dislike the interior perceive that it “saps your energy”<sup>28</sup> and has a dampening effect on creativity. These differing perceptions are both responses to the loading dock appearance of the stage door area, the predominance of bare concrete floors and walls and the exposed service conduits and air conditioning vents that snake across many ceilings. Even in the plusher areas of the Opera House, the quality of finishes is still perceived as low. One practitioner working for Opera Australia remarked that it would be preferable if “there was some contrast



between the areas that have to be functional and areas like the greenroom that could be a bit nicer.”<sup>29</sup>

The perception of a marked contrast between exterior and interior can be traced directly to decisions made during the building’s construction. Utzon’s resignation in early 1966 came at a time when Stage II of construction was approaching completion. The panel of Australian architects assembled to design and construct Stage III of the building was instructed to minimise any additional cost increases. To comply with this directive, a “hierarchy of treatment”<sup>30</sup> was established. This ranked the importance of design and finish in areas of the building thus:

1. exterior and external works;
2. main auditoria;
3. other public areas;
4. administration and artists’ areas;
5. service areas.<sup>31</sup>

This ranking is still perceived today by practitioners who are unaware of its existence other than from what their own experience of the building suggests. This has led to perceptions that the building was never finished. One of the dressers working for Opera Australia expressed such an opinion by indicating with her outstretched arm a white washed concrete wall that runs parallel to the Opera Theatre principals’ dressing rooms, “It’s never been finished,” she stated, “all this Tutankhamen’s tomb here...”<sup>32</sup> In this way, practitioners are haunted by a past prioritisation of building finishes that has resulted in the Opera House being “a curious mixture of magnificent architecture and ordinary utilitarian building.”<sup>33</sup>

A second aspect of haunting that affects practitioner experiences within the Sydney Opera House is the confused nature of boundaries between artistic and non-artistic areas within the building.

The Playhouse and Drama Theatre venues of the Opera House are both nestled within the western side of the podium, amongst foyer, bar and administration areas. These venues were inserted into the existing fabric of the Opera House as part of the Review of Programme that was carried out in the wake of Utzon's departure.

Respected Sydney-based actor Peter Carroll has described in detail his experience of working within these venues. While he perceives the practitioner areas of these venues as generally "very poorly designed"<sup>34</sup>, Peter has detailed this view in relation to the Drama Theatre which he sees as a theatrical venue that has been "shoved into another form and ... allowed to stay there."<sup>35</sup> Peter's description of working on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Drama Theatre provides an insight into the way the confused nature of boundaries within that venue is experienced during performance. In particular, Peter described the two complicated routes on offer to him when at one point he needed to quickly exit the stage from the Prompt side, change costume, and re-enter the stage from the Opposite Prompt side:

In *Romeo and Juliet* I remember ... going up to the 'quick change', through the door, down the stairs to stage level, keep going, down another flight of stairs to go under the stage. Go under the stage. Go up the stairs to stage level. Keep going up two flights of stairs, out into the central passage on the other side. Through there, past - make sure the bar staff behind the bar, are working, shut their door if they are - take a few paces to the other [door]. Open the door; go down the steps to stage level. But that took too long! So, instead, I had to go out of the dressing room, turn right, go down the central passage, turn left, at the second door on your right, go into there – that's the administration – go through the office, avoiding all the paperwork, and all that stuff, through another series of publicity offices, all the way through, to the central passage. Then you are in the bar. Shut the bar door. Open the other door, go down the other stairs, and you've just made it.<sup>36</sup>

This description demonstrates the way one practitioner has regularly encountered administration and catering areas during performances. In the vicinity of the Drama Theatre this situation is further exacerbated by the fact that practitioners wishing to travel between the stage and their dressing rooms must use the same central passage as both catering and administration staff. While this is easily negotiated in most circumstances, practitioners report that their preparation for an entrance can be unnecessarily interrupted by having to encounter strangers in a general access passageway whilst en route to the stage. During matinee performances practitioners report that this passage can feel like a major traffic thoroughfare.<sup>37</sup>

The third and most encompassing experience of haunting encountered by practitioners within the Sydney Opera House is that of compromise. The operation of this experience of haunting is expressed in Gay McAuley's observation that theatre buildings "incorporate within themselves indications of the practices they are designed to house."<sup>38</sup> For the practitioners who work within the Opera Theatre venue, significant compromises are required to perform a ballet or an opera in a theatre originally conceptualised as a venue for dramatic presentations.

The Opera Theatre within the Sydney Opera House is used by only three companies each year. Opera Australia is in residence for nine months each year, the Australian Ballet for two months and the Sydney Dance Company for the remaining month. For both the ballet and opera companies a lack of wing space within the theatre significantly restricts onstage performances, whilst the cramped nature of the orchestra pit affects programming and acoustics. Interestingly, amongst the practitioners who work for both the opera and ballet companies there is a communal knowledge that prior to the 'Review of Programme' the Major Hall was intended to be a venue for their respective art forms. In the case of Opera Australia, this knowledge has itself been the subject of an opera, *The Eighth Wonder*, commissioned by the company.

The severe lack of wing space and cramped working environment found within the Opera Theatre impacts upon both performers and technicians alike by forcing a greater level of discipline into some of their work practices and precluding others.<sup>39</sup> For dancers, there is the essential problem that “you can’t do anything sidestage.”<sup>40</sup> Physical preparation for performance is limited to areas elsewhere in the building. More seriously than this, however, the lack of wing space impacts directly upon the nature of the performance. With no room to decelerate in the wings, dancers must do so whilst still onstage. One former dancer expressed this situation by drawing an analogy with aeroplanes: “Instead of being able to ... sail through the air like a great big Boeing, they [the dancers] look more like a DC3. So they are pulling back all the time.”<sup>41</sup> A similar compromise affects performances of opera where, as one performer has reported, many artistic decisions are taken solely “due to the physical limitations of the building.”<sup>42</sup> The lack of wing space increases the amount of time it takes to get an opera chorus on and off the stage and limits the ability for performers to execute quick changes of costume. This can result in more than the usual amount of intervals being scheduled into operas.<sup>43</sup>

The Opera Theatre’s inadequate orchestra pit is the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra’s (AOBO’s) primary place of performance. The sheer lack of room in the pit, its inappropriate design and its associated acoustical problems are clear examples of practitioners being forced to compromise with inadequate working conditions. In addition, earplugs are made available to the orchestra to avoid hearing damage to those members sitting in particularly poor positions. The designation of the Major Hall as a single purpose concert venue in the Review of Programme established the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the privileged position of being the resident artists in the Opera House’s largest venue. This historical decision continues to haunt the musicians of the AOBO whose use of the language of “here” versus “there” to distinguish the Opera Theatre from the Concert Hall reveals their sense of the distance that separates the two venues. A lingering rivalry between the two orchestras is another effect of the historical decision, a rivalry

“exacerbated by the fact they have way better facilities over there, they work half the hours, and for twice the pay.”<sup>44</sup>

In this paper I have demonstrated the ways in which the experience of practitioners working within the Sydney Opera House continues to be haunted by previous government funding and design priorities. The decisions made in accordance with those priorities have affected the very fabric of the building leading to clear perceptions of difference between the building’s exterior and its interior, an experience of confused boundaries between artistic and non-artistic areas and the forcing of practitioners to make significant compromises in the carrying out of their work.

Despite the genuine love felt by many practitioners towards the Sydney Opera House, at an embodied level of experience its work spaces exhibit a curiously ambiguous attitude towards the practical requirements of theatre practitioners. Working within the famous exterior of the Sydney Opera House theatre practitioners constantly experience a haunting reminder that while their work and effort is valued, it is only valued to a limited extent.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This exchange is taken from Scene 13 of *The Eighth Wonder*, an opera commissioned by Opera Australia on the subject of the Sydney Opera House's construction. Taken from Alan John and Dennis Watkins, *The Eighth Wonder: An Opera by Alan John and Dennis Watkins, The Opera Australasia Libretto Series* (Sydney: Pellinor Pty Ltd, 1995), 67.
- <sup>2</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 131.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 133.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 7.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward S. Casey, "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1996), 19.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.
- <sup>12</sup> Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, 32.
- <sup>13</sup> Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 38.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Philip Parsons and Victoria Chance, eds., *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia* (Paddington: Currency Press, 1997), 31.
- <sup>17</sup> Philip Drew, *Sydney Opera House, Jorn Utzon* (London: Phaidon, 1995), 4.
- <sup>18</sup> Harold R. Snedcof, *Cultural Facilities in Mixed-Use Development* (Washington D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1985), 11.
- <sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Sir Eugene Goossens appears to have been the first person to refer to the proposed venue as an "opera house". This is despite the fact that he clearly intended the venue to be a "fine hall" for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Goossens' term 'opera house' has stuck to the building despite the fact that opera is performed in the smaller of its two main venues. Eugene Goossens in Paul Bentley, 'The Sydney Opera House: A Chronology 1606-2009' in *The Wolanski Foundation*, last accessed at <http://www.twf.org.au/search/sohstory1.html> on 8/01/2003.
- <sup>20</sup> Amongst the conditions of the competition, the venue requirements read:

"1. There shall be two halls – one large and one small hall. The large hall should seat between 3,000-3,500 persons. The small hall should seat approximately 1,200 persons.  
The large hall to be designed for use for the following purposes: –

- 
- a) Symphony Concerts (including organ music and soloists).
  - b) Large-scale Opera.
  - c) Ballet and Dance.
  - d) Choral
  - e) Pageants and Mass Meetings.
2. The small hall to be designed for use for the following purposes:
- a) Dramatic Presentations
  - b) Intimate Opera.
  - c) Chamber Music.
  - d) Concerts and Recitals
  - e) Lectures.

The requirements under 1 and 2 above, have been listed in order of priority with respect to the attention which should be given to their specialised building needs.”

Cited in James Semple Kerr, "Sydney Opera House: An Interim Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site," (Sydney: Sydney Opera House Trust, 1993), 13 - 14.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Drew, *The Masterpiece: Jorn Utzon: A Secret Life* (South Yarra: Hardie Grant Books, 1999), 166.

<sup>23</sup> John Yeomans, *The Other Taj Mahal: What Happened to the Sydney Opera House* (Camberwell: Longmans Australia, 1968), 120.

<sup>24</sup> Yuzo Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*. (Tokyo: Shokokusha Publishing Co., 2001), 136.

<sup>25</sup> These cross-sections of the Sydney Opera House are used courtesy of the Sydney Opera House Trust.

<sup>26</sup> Marvin Carlson notes that the ‘articulation of space’ and ‘decorative elements’ present in a building are two general ways in which people experience them. Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 9.

<sup>27</sup> David Hobson, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5th March 2003.

<sup>28</sup> John Brunato, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 1st March 2003.

<sup>29</sup> James Payne, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 11th February 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Kerr, "Sydney Opera House: An Interim Plan for the Conservation of the Sydney Opera House and Its Site," 23.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Hall in Ibid., 24.

<sup>32</sup> Sheila Beames, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 25th February 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Mikami, *Utzon's Sphere: Sydney Opera House - How It Was Designed and Built*, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Carroll, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 11th September 2001.

<sup>35</sup> Carroll, Peter. Paper presented at the Making Theatre Everyday Life Forum, Customs House, Sydney, 25th September 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> More than one performer has referred to this passageway as resembling ‘Pitt Street’. The actual Pitt Street is a busy shopping mall in Sydney’s Central Business District.

<sup>38</sup> McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> In effect, the Opera Theatre has no wings; performers and crew can walk along both sides of the stage unseen, but all set changes are effected from the rear of the stage area.

<sup>40</sup> Rachel Rawlins, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales 5th December 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Colin Peasley, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5th December 2002.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Biggins, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 5th March 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Opera Australia’s recent production of *Orpheus in the Underworld* contained three acts instead of two because the lack of room in the theatre’s wings forced the members of the chorus to return to their downstairs dressing rooms to change costume.

<sup>44</sup> Gabby Waters, interview with author, Sydney, New South Wales, 10th March 2003.